

Community-led conservation efforts in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Community-led conservation is a strategy that involves local communities and indigenous people taking the lead in managing and protecting natural resources. This approach aims to ensure sustainable use of resources and preservation of biodiversity. The objectives of this paper are to make an assessment of the state of Community-Led Conservation (CLC) effort in Zimbabwe. This paper argues that community-led conservation efforts can have a positive impact on local communities by supporting traditional ways of life and building political support for protected areas if done properly. Community-led approaches put communities in charge, allowing them to make key decisions. This study conducts a comprehensive literature review anchored by Ghana's Community Resource Management Areas Model (CREMA) to address the following issues: Role of community-led conservation, Reasons for supporting community-led conservation, Principles of community-led conservation, and Impact of Community-led conservation on biodiversity and ecosystem services. CREMA is a structured, democratic and legally supported approach to conservation that prioritizes community-led strategies. By integrating conservation practices into the daily lives of communities such as sustainable agriculture, responsible tourism, and habitat restoration, this model ensures that both humans and wildlife can thrive without compromising the delicate balance of ecosystems. This study utilise the interpretivist research philosophy and data were collected through focus group discussions with communities around three conservancies. Qualitative data was analyzed through thematic approach. The study found that CLC in Zimbabwe is in a state of paralysis, communities are no longer involved in conservation efforts and communities are no longer have buy-in in conservation. Human-wildlife conflict is increasing as new human settlements encroach into conservancies. This study recommends the resuscitation of CAMPIRE and the adoption of the CREMA model through

collaboration with local stakeholders to build awareness and support for conservation efforts and encourage local communities to use land sustainably to reduce human-wildlife conflict and improve ecosystem health.

Key words: Community-led Conservation, Community Resource Management Model, Biodiversity, Ecosystem.

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1. Introduction

Community-led conservation is a strategy that involves local communities and indigenous people taking the lead in managing and protecting natural resources. This approach aims to ensure sustainable use of resources and preservation of biodiversity. This method bridges the gap between conservation goals and socio-economic development, fostering a harmonious relationship between humans and nature for the generations to come. Collaborative decision-making processes plays a crucial role in community led conservation efforts. In these initiatives, involving local communities is essential because it taps into the knowledge, perspectives and experiences of those who live in and depend on the natural resources of the area.

Local communities possess valuable insights about the ecosystem, its biodiversity and its challenges. By including locals in decision-making, conservation efforts become more effective and sustainable. Moreover, engaging communities fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, motivating individuals to actively participate in protecting their environment. This collaborative approach enhances the success of conservation projects and promotes social equity and ensures the benefits of conservation to be shared among those directly affected by the outcomes. In essence, community involvement is a cornerstone of successful and inclusive conservation strategies. The project contributes to the base of evidence that demonstrates the crucial role of indigenous peoples and communities in biodiversity conservation and sustainable use.

Community-led conservation initiatives are essential to sustainable natural resource management and biodiversity conservation. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), specifically Ghana, these initiatives primarily occur through Community Resource Management Areas (CREMAs), vital in involving local communities in conservation activities to achieve conservation goals and enhance livelihoods.

CREMAs provide a platform for community members to demarcate traditional boundaries for the resource management area, including core and development zones (Baaweh, Baddianaah, & Baatuuwie, 2022). They establish committees such as the CREMA Executive Committee (CEC) and Community Resource Management Committee (CRMC) to oversee resource management. The government officially recognizes CREMAs by awarding them a certificate of devolution, granting communities legally binding authority over their resources. Together, these committees develop a comprehensive resource management plan that includes rules and regulations, monitoring activities, and enforcement (Wildlife Division Policy for Collaborative Community Based Wildlife Management, 2000).

Within CREMAs, various activities occur including ecosystem restoration and rehabilitation efforts, environmental awareness campaigns, regulating bushfires, hunting and logging practices. CREMAs also facilitate connections between producers such as farmers, Shea collectors and businesses that promote community initiatives while ensuring the procurement of high-quality products at fair prices. Conservation agreements may also be established where organizations contribute to a conservation fund to support conservation activities.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

To determine the role of Community-Led Conservation in the preservation of biodiversity and ecosystem services in Zimbabwe.

To identify the principles of CLC.

To assess the impact of CLC on the community wellbeing and livelihoods.

To apply the CREMA model on the Zimbabwean conservation efforts

2. Literature Review

Community-based conservation thrives to integrate culturally sensitive, socioeconomic development with nature conservation to catalyze benefits for both people and nature. It aims to foster stewardship of local ecosystems and biodiversity by enabling, championing and elevating local and collaborative governance systems as well as management practices (A. Charles Ed, 2021; Mahajan, et al., 2021; Jupiter, et al, 2014). The discourse on community-based conservation evolved to embrace local value systems and knowledge, decolonize conservation, support human well-being and ensure the equitable distribution of benefits and costs from conservation (Guibrinet, et al, 2021). The practice of community-based conservation can either be grassroots driven or implemented top-down for example via government directives or policies of the funding institution (Mahajan, et al., 2021).

Community-led conservation allows people to live and actively manage a landscape to support themselves while protecting natural resources and species. CLC also known as “working lands” conservation which allows for a sustainable natural resource use. This differentiates it from many traditional conservation projects that have emphasized the establishment of protected areas with much stricter controls on human visitation, use, and impacts. Community-led conservation is not just a slogan; it’s a seismic shift in how we approach environmental protection. Gone are the days when conservation meant fencing off areas and excluding local populations. Today, it’s all about empowering communities to become stewards of their own environments.

Community-led conservation is based on the idea that sustainably managed, maintain biodiversity, provide goods and services for humanity and support the environmental conditions necessary for sustainability and resilience (Kremen & Merenlender, 2018). Community-led conservation attempts to strike a balance between protecting nature and supporting traditional communities’ self-governance, rights, and economic development (Borges & Olander, 2020). It also champions traditional and indigenous ecological knowledge as a guide to sustainable use and management.

Community-led conservation has been shown in some cases to be more effective in the long-term for conserving carbon, biodiversity and natural resources than projects that don't allow active landscape management. Current studies shows that community-led conservation can be more effective than government measures over the long-term and tends to be less expensive (Schuster, et al., 2019). Indigenous lands have higher global biodiversity values and carbon stock (Rights and Resources Institute, et al. 2018) than anywhere else on earth. This is powerful evidence that traditional ecological knowledge and management practices are successful at delivering conservation outcomes (Rundle & Hannah., 2019). However indigenous and traditional communities are under tremendous pressure (Zwick, Bennett and Halla, 2020). Safeguarding this biodiversity and carbon is most likely to be accomplished through a community-led conservation approach that strengthens communities' capacity to secure their land rights, defend against illegal incursions, and manage natural resources sustainably (Forest Trends Association. Indigenous Territorial Governance in Latin America, 2019) Research has shown that deforestation and forest degradation is lower in forests where communities have secure tenure rights.

Community-led conservation complements and expands upon existing traditional conservation efforts necessary to reverse biodiversity loss. Greater investment in community-led conservation should be an increasingly important complement to traditional conservation projects. Places suitable for establishing new protected areas are becoming scarce, leaving options that are remote and not as beneficial to biodiversity or people (Erbaugh, 2020). Community-led conservation can complement new and existing strict protected areas. For example, a patchwork of protected areas and sustainable working landscapes together enhance habitat connectivity to promote the free movement of species, natural processes and ecosystem services (Kremen & Merenlender, 2018). The broad coalitions necessary to make community-led conservation work have greater potential to create a collective impact. Collaboration between communities, grassroots movements, NGOs, and sometimes public-private partners are more adaptable and better equipped to demand changes and drive lasting transformations, especially at government levels.

2.1 Community-Led Conservation strategies to support sustainable development

Community-Led Conservation allows benefits to be harvested by communities. Self-directed enterprises like agroforestry, sustainable timber, artisanal handcrafts and producing non-timber forest products, like acai, Brazil nuts, cocoa allow communities to sustain themselves and their land long-term. The planning, management and monitoring required for these activities also leads to more frequent land patrols which ultimately increases territorial protection (Borges & Olander, 2020). Forest Trends has supported communities with such efforts for over two decades and has observed the power and wide-ranging benefits of small investments in community-led forest enterprises first-hand (Forest Trends Association. Indigenous Territorial Governance in Latin America, 2019). These benefits are incentive for continued long-term stewardship. Demonstrated successes help to make a strong case for government support and recognition. Community-led conservation is also an investment in human rights and a solution that aligns the priorities of human well-being, sustainable development and preventing forest loss.

Indigenous peoples have developed sophisticated knowledge systems and management practices that enable them to live sustainably in their environments for many generations and in many cases and millennia. By giving them greater control over the management of natural resources, community-led conservation can ensure that these valuable traditions are preserved and that biodiversity is protected for future generations. Over the course of the project, this larger base of evidence will directly impact how much local and national governments recognize and support indigenous peoples' and local communities' beneficial roles in biodiversity protection. Consequently, this will also improve the level of protection and recognition of their underlying rights to land, resources and traditional knowledge.

These two aspects of the long-term impact are closely connected: sustaining community-led long-term management of natural resources is linked to the security of underlying tenure, yet in many of the project countries customary tenure is insufficiently recognized. By demonstrating the valuable contributions that these territories make to national biodiversity priorities, the project makes the case for increasing security of tenure over the longer-term.

2.2 Principles of Community Led Conservation

Community-led conservation is based on principles that emphasize the importance of local communities in protecting their natural resources (Baaweh, Baddianaah, & Baatuuwie, 2022). The first principle includes community participation. Community participation involve the community in the design and planning stages of conservation projects. Sustainability rule ensure that conservation efforts are sustainable and address the needs of the community. The third principle is inclusivity, in which policies of conservation make sure that the conservation efforts are inclusive and everyone in the community has a say. Local expertise also remains useful in CLC where there is active local community's knowledge and expertise to ensure that conservation practices are practical and culturally relevant. Empowerment builds the community's capacity to take action and implement conservation efforts on an ongoing basis. The last principle is ethical data collection. Collect data in a way that is ethical, reliable, and verifiable remains important. Community-led conservation efforts can lead to lasting success if they are based on these principles (Baaweh, Baddianaah, & Baatuuwie, 2022).

2.3 Impact of CLC on Biodiversity and Ecosystem

The principal benefits of the conservation policy have been the reduced depletion of natural resources and increased wildlife, achieved by providing alternative fuel wood, fodder and other energy supplies.

As a result of conservation policy, there has been an increase in fodder and fuel wood trees on private woodlots, regeneration of trees on degraded land, greatly increased local institutional development, an increase in forest cover, easier availability of fodder and fuel wood in the forest, improved water resources, an increase in wildlife populations, infrastructure development and improvements in health and sanitation. The major costs of conservation are increase in crop damage by wildlife, a decrease in fodder grass species in forests, a decrease in wild mushroom availability in forests and a decrease in crop production as a result of shading by the on-farm plantations of trees.

The major economic benefits received by local people are investments made to improve social services, agriculture and livestock improvement, development of employment opportunities and provision of various training schemes. Within CREMAs, various activities occur, including ecosystem restoration and rehabilitation efforts, environmental awareness campaigns, regulating bushfires, hunting and logging practices. CREMAs also facilitate connections between producers such as farmers and Shea collectors and businesses that promote community initiatives while ensuring the procurement of high-quality products at fair prices. Conservation agreements may also be established where organizations or companies contribute to a conservation fund to support conservation activities.

Studies have reported CREMA's benefits, including the potential to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (Asare, Kyei, & Mason, 2013) and support ecotourism activities (Bonye, Yiridomoh, & Dayour, 2022). They promote income diversity, which boosts local economies and further increases accountability and democratization at the grassroots level (United Nations Development Programme Wechiau Community Hippo Sanctuary, 2012). Communities in the CREMAs are reported to have access to natural resource goods as a source of food, fuel, medicine, flora and fauna (Baaweh, Baddianaah, & Baatuuwue, 2022).

CREMAs have also increased community and landowner rights to manage natural resources usually controlled by the government (Techno Serve Ghana agricultural and natural resource management project, 2018). However, despite its potential, the CREMA initiative has been criticized (O'Connor, Djoudi, & Zida, 2021). Some argue that, this policy and legal framework is state-centered and fails to fully consider the local community's holistic needs regarding to sustainable and effective forest as well as animal resource management (O'Connor, Djoudi, & Zida, 2021). Also (Pienaah, Batung, Saaka, Mohammed and Luginaah, 2023) argues that the CREMAs lack the financial support to operate their conservation funds system. They recommended establishing credit systems for women in CREMAs and non-CREMAs to support conservation efforts (Pienaah, Batung, Saaka, Mohammed, & Luginaah, 2023). Despite recognizing the importance of natural resources in CREMAs, there is little information available on the impact of CREMAs on the host communities.

3. Methodology

Literature search was conducted across multiple electronic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. A combination of keywords and search terms was used to identify relevant studies. The search terms included: “Role of community-led conservation”, “principles of CLC”, “Impact of CLC on community wellbeing and livelihoods” and “CREMA”. The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings and reports published in English between 2000 and 2024. Focus Group Discussions (FGD) was used to collect data.

Three sets of FGD were held with communities around Gonarezhou National Park, Hwange National Game Reserve and Lake Chivero Conservancy. Each FGD had eight participants. Questions were derived from CREMA constructs following the Demarcation of traditional boundaries, Establishment of Executive Committees, Government recognition, Production of a Resources Management Plan and Conservation activities (ecosystem restoration, and rehabilitation efforts, environmental awareness campaigns, regulating bush fires, hunting, and logging practices, connecting producers to the market and conservation agreements for funding).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Gonarezhou National Park Community

4.1.1 Demarcation of traditional boundaries

We have clear boundaries that separate us from the animal conservancy. However, animals being animals, they freely roam around causing human-wildlife conflicts. We have learnt to coexist and we have developed some mechanisms to scare them away without causing unnecessary harm to both humans and wildlife.

4.1.2 Establishment of Executive Committees

We used to have very solid CAMPFIRE structures before the land reform program but now, we have nothing formal. Our gatherings are informal based on some understanding that our communities need to be protected from wild animals. Safari companies are however more organized, with clear formal committees. This is not surprising since all the licensed hunting takes place through them.

4.1.3 Government recognition.

Since we are not formally organized, Government has no mechanism of reaching us. It used to do so through CAMPFIRE programs. We know that Government is aware of the issues around human/wildlife conflicts but I think it is up to us to reorganize ourselves again if we expect to influence policy.

4.1.4 Production of a Resources Management Plan.

We have nothing to report on this, but we know for sure that Safari companies have them as a government requirement for being granted hunting licenses.

4.2 Conservation activities (ecosystem restoration, and rehabilitation efforts, environmental awareness campaigns, regulating bush fires, hunting, and logging practices, connecting producers to the market and conservation agreements for funding).

These activities seem to have died with the demise of CAMPFIRE. We are no longer actively and formally involved. Safari companies around this area have all these things in place. Remember these companies want to look good on environmentally conscious to their foreign hunting customers.

4.2.1 Hwange National Game Reserve

a) Demarcation of traditional boundaries

We know where we have been traditionally settled but new settlements are cropping up and encroaching into the reserve. It is not good optics at all.

b) Establishment of Executive Committees

These no longer exist since the time of CAMPFIRE. We are no longer organized at all. It is now free for all.

c) Government recognition

There is nothing to be recognized. We get arrested when we kill animals for food. The coexistence we used to have with wildlife has gone.

d) Production of a Resources Management Plan

We do not even know what that is about. My friend, there is chaos out there. Lawlessness. We heard a few months ago that Government had allowed Chinese companies to set up mining operations within the reserve. That is unacceptable.

4.3 Conservation activities (ecosystem restoration and rehabilitation efforts, environmental awareness campaigns, regulating bush fires, hunting and logging practices, connecting producers to the market and conservation agreements for funding).

Nothing of the sort happens around here. Some of those things you mention used to happen during the time when CAMPFIRE used to be active. Not anymore.

4.3.1 Lake Chivero Conservancy.

a) Demarcation of traditional boundaries

We are organized here. Remember we are very close to the capital city.

b) Establishment of executive committees

No, we are not involved at all. We are settled around here for a serene natural environment. The national parks people are always around doing their job.

c) Government recognition

No, there is nothing we need to be recognized for. The parks people are doing a wonderful job.

d) Production of a Resources Management Plan

All we want as a community is to see the natural environment being maintained because that was the reason we came here for in the first place. We hate it when we hear that rhinos and fish died as a result of toxic water. We hate to see the lake choking from hyacinth. We want to trust that the parks people have a plan to deal with all these issues.

4.4 Conservation activities (ecosystem restoration and rehabilitation efforts, environmental awareness campaigns, regulating bush fires, hunting and logging practices, connecting producers to the market and conservation agreements for funding).

Apparently as the surrounding community, we are not actively involved in any of these activities. We are however extremely concerned with the pollution of Lake Chivero where recently we lost 10 Rhinos and other animals due to water poisoning. The Lake is currently infested and clogged with water hyacinth which we believe is depriving oxygen for our marine animals. We also understand that the city of Harare is allowing untreated raw sewage into the water body contributing to the worsening of polluting the lake.

There are a number of issues here but we feel the responsible authorities should take appropriate action where it is needed.

5. Conclusions

The CREMA model has helped in assessing the state of CLC in selected wildlife protected areas in Zimbabwe. Although traditional boundaries exist, human activities are encroaching into conservancies increasing human-wildlife conflicts. Conservation committees no longer exist since the sad demise of CAMPFIRE. The communities surrounding conservancies are no longer actively involved in conservation. Since there are no organized structures, government has no mechanism to recognize CLC. The demise of CAMPIRE put paid to all conservation efforts. Communities no longer have any buy-in into conservation, they do not have any plans for it. CLC in Zimbabwe has collapsed and is in a state of paralysis. Some say it is as a result of the death of CAMPFIRE, others say it was the land reform program while others say it is due to multifaceted factors that include political, economic and social disintegration in Zimbabwe.

6. Recommendations

Zimbabwe has no choice but to resuscitate CLC either through a new robust community-centered CAMPIRE or adopt the Ghana CREMA Model.

There must be collaboration with local stakeholders to build awareness and support for conservation efforts and encourage local communities to use land sustainably to reduce human-wildlife conflict and improve ecosystem health.

There are five principles of community-centered conservation governance for the post-2020 framework:

- 6.1 Build multilevel networks and collaborative relationships needed to coproduce conservation solutions that provide social and ecological outcomes;
- 6.2 Promote equity and opportunity for all, recognizing specifically the role of women as agents of change in community-centered conservation;
- 6.3 Reframe conservation action through the lens of reconciliation and redress (e.g., injustices from land grabs and territorial enclosures);
- 6.4 Adopt a rights-based approach to conservation action in which community access and decision-making autonomy are emphasized; and
- 6.5 Revitalize the customary and local institutions that provide legitimate adaptive strategies for the stewardship of biodiversity.

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